

Honors American Literature & Composition

Final Exam Spring 2015 Study Guide

For each text, be prepared to consider the meaning and importance of central characters, conflicts, plot devices, figurative language and other literary techniques. As you review, consider how details of the text make clear important themes.

Unit One - Whitman and Dickinson

Be prepared to answer questions (with excerpts) of poems read in class as well as a cold reading from each poet. Also be prepared to make use of the process of explication (to understand the meaning of a poem by examining its form and style, to understand its life force through figuring out how the poem ticks)

Emily Dickinson

- **Biography/importance:** her solitude and seclusion, publication history, relationships
- **Poetic/stylistic techniques:** conciseness, blank verse, elliptical phrasing and dashes, slant rhyme, alliteration, assonance, consonance
- **Figurative devices:** ambiguity, paradox, metaphor, subjectivity, concrete images to convey symbolic ideas
- **Poems read in class:** “Because I Could Not Stop for Death,” “The Soul Selects Her Own Society,” “The Brain Is Wider than the Sky,” “I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died”
- **Themes:** reverence for nature and understandings of humanity through nature; the sanctity of individuality and solitude; conflicts of faith and doubt; a life of pain, suffering and mortality

Walt Whitman

- **Biography/importance:** no formal education (like Franklin and Twain), called the poet of democracy as he celebrates the common man, nature and the city, and sensuality of the physical body, eulogizes Lincoln in “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” his sensibility straddles romanticism and realism
- **Poetic/stylistic techniques:** anaphora, repetition, parallel structure, long lines, alliteration, assonance, consonance
- **Figurative devices:** metaphor, epic poem, listing/cataloging, cadence (of the common man)
- **Poems read in class:** “O Me, O Life,” “I Hear America Singing,” “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer,” “*Noiseless, Patient Spider*,” *Song of Myself*
- **Themes:** unity of people especially the unity of Americans; Optimistic faith in democracy and equality; transcendent power of love, brotherhood, and comradeship; reverence for nature and understandings of humanity through nature; unabashed exaltation of the body and sexuality

Unit Two - Realism, Regionalism, Naturalism

Be prepared to answer questions of the following texts read in class as well as a cold reading of a text from this period.

Characteristics of Realism

- Authors of this time period wanted to explore real life and real people, to tell stories realistically without sugar-coating or idealizing anything.

- The emergence of the middle class and innovations in the printing industry make the work of this period the literature of democracy, of the people.
- Characters in the writing of this period are realistic not idealized. Their concerns are social and psychological; their conflicts are real life concerns.
- The division between North and South resulted in a need for national identity and a desire for literature that represented the nation's many voices including those of freed slaves.

Characteristics of Regionalism

- An offshoot of realism, regionalism uses dialect and customs to portray the culture of a particular region.
- Authors sought to portray the local color of a region to show a heterogeneous America, made of regional cultures

Characteristics of Naturalism

- Writers of this literary period believe that people are controlled by heredity and the environment. These are conditions that people have no power over.
- Often depicts man in conflict with nature, society or himself -- nature as ambivalent or antagonistic force

Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn

- **Major characters:** Huck, Jim, Tom, King, Duke
- **Important minor characters:** Pap, Widow Douglas, Miss Watson, Mrs. Loftus, Buck Grangerford, Mary Jane Wilks, Uncle Silas, Aunt Sally
- **Important conflict:** Huck versus self/society/nature; Huck versus Pap/Tom/Miss Watson/King/Duke; Jim versus society/nature
- **Important terms:** bildungsroman, satire, irony, naturalism, motif, characterization, dynamic/static characters, round/flat characters, journey/episodic narrative, dialect, local color
- **Important symbols:** prayer, tricks, Pap's cabin in the woods, Jackson's Island, canoe/raft, fog,
- **Themes:** the choice to follow one's own moral code, the redemptive power of friendship, the conflict of wisdom and school learning, the hypocrisy of (some) religious people, escape from society into nature, humanization (finding humanity) through personal relationships, moral awakenings

Mark Twain's "A True Story Repeated Word for Word, As I Heard It"

- **Major characters:** Aunt Rachel, Misto C--
- **Important minor characters:** Henry
- **Important conflict:** ---
- **Important terms:** frame narrative, counter narrative (breaking down stereotypes), paradox, dialect, local color
- **Important symbols/elements:** Rachel's characterization
- **Themes:** separation of families, stereotypes the break down through personal stories, wisdom versus education, a mother's undying love for her child, need for reunion, hope in the face of despair

Mark Twain's "The Lowest Animal"

- **Important ideas:** analogies between man and the "lower animals" – how does each analogy serve to advance Twain's perspective of human moral failings?
- **Important terms:** metaphor, parallel structure, repetition, restatement, ethos, pathos, logos, satire, irony, paradox
- **Important symbols/elements:** Rachel's characterization

Kate Chopin's "Desiree's Baby"

- **Major characters:** Desiree, Armand
- **Important minor characters:** Madame Valmonde, La Blanche, the baby
- **Important conflict:** Desiree versus Armand; Desiree versus nature (Armand's heredity); Desiree versus society
- **Important terms:** ambiguity, irony, naturalism, imagery, foreshadowing, suspense, surprise ending
- **Important symbols/elements:** description of L'Abri, imagery of destruction, mysterious visitors, La Blanche's quadroon boy, the road that Desiree did not take,
- **Plot:** recall how Desiree comes to understand that her child is of mixed race, how Armand casts her out and where she goes, and how Armand learns that his heritage is the cause.
- **Themes:** How and why are women's lives subject to the judgment of men, and of society? In what ways do men (and society) make assumptions about women, and for what reasons? What images of love and messages about the nature of love does Chopin present (the difference between Armand's father and Armand)? What views of race and racism does Chopin present?

Kate Chopin's "Story of an Hour"

- **Characters:** Mrs. Louise Mallard
- **Important minor characters:** Josephine, Richards, Mr. Mallard
- **Conflicts:** Louise versus society, self
- **Plot:** Louise Mallard's stream of consciousness as she realizes that her husband is dead, and what she hopes her life will become, and how those hopes are dashed in the final moments of the story
- **Symbols/important elements:** the scene out the window, the way Chopin personifies Mrs. Mallard's realization that she is "free, free, free," Louise's "heart trouble," surprise ending
- **Other techniques:** dramatic/verbal/situational irony, imagery, stream of consciousness
- **Themes:** The need for agency and empowerment and the longing for self-determination; the crushing realities of society's oppression/repression; the ironies of how people judge one's internal motives and thoughts
- **Essential Questions:** How does the irony in the story contribute to Chopin's message about women's power (or lack thereof)? What are some of the causes of Louise's desire for freedom; what does Chopin suggest is fundamental source of women's alienation and unhappiness?

Ambrose Bierce's "Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge"

- **Characters:** Peyton Farquhar
- **Conflicts:** Farquhar versus Union soldiers, nature

- **Plot:** Recall the implausible events of Farquhar's escape
- **Symbols/important elements:** the ticking watch, the timber in the river, Farquhar's heightened senses, imagery of nature especially once he leaves the river, imagery of his wife
- **Other techniques:** Naturalism, irony, foreshadowing, flashback, suspense, surprise ending, imagery, stream of consciousness
- **Themes:** In what ways is the fantasy of Farquhar's escape an effort to control his circumstances? What does his fantasy say about what one wants most in the moment of death?

Jack London's "To Build a Fire"

- **Characters:** the unnamed man, the dog
- **Conflicts:** Man versus nature, self
- **Plot:** Recall the mistakes in judgment leading up to the man's downfall and consider how the old timer at Sulphur Creek and the dog both respect the dangers of the physical environment in ways that the man does not
- **Symbols/important elements:** the dog, fire, ice/cold
- **Other techniques:** irony, suspense, imagery, naturalism, regionalism
- **Themes:** the arrogance of man in terms of trying to overcome nature, the conflict of wild vs. tamed, the dangers of ignorance

Unit Three - Modernism

Be prepared to answer questions of the following texts read in class as well as a cold reading of a text from this period.

Characteristics of Modernism

- People of this period lost their optimism and felt uncertain and disillusioned because of war, the Depression, and changes in culture.
- Writers used a technique called stream of consciousness, which attempted to imitate the natural flow of characters' thoughts, insights, and memories
- Despite the outward gaiety of the Jazz Age, young Americans of this period were named "the lost generation" because of their disillusionment.
- Literature of this period is characterized by experimentation of form and content; fragmentation reveals the incomprehension of a rapidly changing world.
- Black writers emerged during this period as a movement to define their place in American identity; they celebrated their culture and exalted their heritage.
- Modern psychology including Sigmund Freud influenced this movement.
- This literary period signaled a movement away from realism and objectivity towards abstraction and subjectivity.
- Many writers of this period traveled and lived in Europe, earning the nickname, "expatriates."

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

- **Characters:** Nick Carraway, Jay Gatsby, Daisy and Tom Buchanan, Jordan Baker
- **Minor Characters:** Tom and Myrtle Wilson
- **Conflicts:** Nick versus self; Gatsby versus time; Gatsby versus Daisy; Gatsby versus Tom
- **Plot:** review the revelations about Gatsby's character (especially how Nick becomes suspicious but then accepting of Gatsby's constructed/performed identity)
- **Symbols/important elements:** the green light and others color, money, carelessness and cars, rumors and secret, Valley of Ashes, East Egg, West Egg
- **Other techniques:** motifs, flashbacks, shift in POV, historical context of the 1920s
- **Themes:** decadence and nihilism (the meaninglessness of modern society), betrayal, corruption, disillusionment
- **Essential Questions:** What does the failure of Gatsby's dream say about America during this time? In what way might the novel point to the differences between love and obsession? Does the novel indicate that love is even possible in this time? In what other ways does this time of the novel reveal a loss of stable values and social norms?

Ernest Hemingway's "A Soldier's Home"

- **Characters:** Harold Krebs, mother, Helen
- **Conflicts:** Krebs versus mother, Krebs versus society
- **Plot:** consider how what is not said is just as important as what is said (what is not in the pictures), consider how the war has impacted Krebs and how it makes him miss the world around him (the girls, the town, his mother), consider what his mother (and implied father) want Krebs to do and how Krebs reacts
- **Symbols/important elements:** two pictures (first two paragraphs), maps and history books, girls, the car, prayer
- **Other techniques:** iceberg principle, characterization, ambiguity
- **Themes:** the trauma and alienation of war, the pressures to conform and return to normalcy, the challenges of a society that wants to romanticize war and soldiers (not allowing them to experience fear, anxiety, and psychological trauma), what war damages (in a person, family, town, society)

T.S. Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

- **Poetic/stylistic techniques:** ambiguity, imagery, irony, repetition, fragmentation, dramatic monologue, stream of consciousness
- **Figurative devices:** allusion, metaphor, rhyme scheme
- **Themes:** alienation and insecurity, futile seeking of companionship and connection, self-doubt and fear of rejection

Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*

- **Characters:** All members of the Younger family, Carl Lindner, Joseph Asagai, George Murchison
- **Conflicts:** Notable **internal conflicts** include Walter Lee's and Lena's decisions about the insurance money and the potential new home, Walter Lee's feelings about finding a better dream in life, Beneatha's feelings on religion

and on George Murchison and Joseph Asagai, Ruth's struggles with her pregnancy and with how to understand what Walter Lee wants, and the overall family's approach toward moving to the White-dominated suburbs. Notable **external conflicts** include Walter Lee vs. Beneatha, Walter Lee vs. George Murchison, Walter Lee vs. Lena, Walter Lee vs. Ruth (basically, Walter Lee vs. everyone in the play!), and the Younger family vs. Carl Lindner.

- **Plot:** Refer back to the optional questions in the study guide. However, the test will not be too plot-heavy.
- **Symbols:** Eggs, Lena's plant, the \$10,000 check, George Murchison's white shoes, and Joseph Asagai's African garb and style
- **Other techniques:** **Allusion** to Langston Hughes's "Harlem" (a.k.a. "Dream Deferred") poem, **juxtaposition/contrast** of white and black (people and cultures), rich and poor, "old" versus "new" generations, men vs. women, and using George Murchison and Joseph Asagai as **foils**, or opposing characters who share motivations (i.e., winning Beneatha's heart)
- **Themes:** Don't sell yourself out (e.g., morals, beliefs, dreams, (wo)manhood), strength and importance of family, conflicting needs and expectations in relationships, love and trust prevail over deceit and selfishness, hope and faith in dreams, playing it safe or taking big risks

Harlem Renaissance poetry of Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes

Review the poetic techniques (especially the differences between Cullen and Hughes); expect a cold reading as well as some of the poems from the poetry slam

- **Langston Hughes:** cadences and dialects of Black Americans, informal poetic techniques, metaphors, similes and imagery, narrative/dramatic/lyric poems
- **Countee Cullen:** formal poetic technique, imagery, metaphors and similes, rhyme scheme, meter, narrative/lyric poems

Katherine Ann Porter “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall”

- **Characters:** to come
- **Conflicts:** to come
- **Plot:** to come
- **Symbols/important elements:** to come
- **Other techniques:** to come
- **Themes:** to come